1: Mi Mi Khaing I-5 (no date) 1946 AP1 Burma
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CHAPTER NINE

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MEN of my father's generation followed a definite pattern in the stages of their lives. They passed their infancy and early childhood playing around their mother's knee, but as soon as they were capable of receiving spiritual influence and training, the atmosphere of the monastery and the men of religion enwrapt them. Thus their spiritual life began at the monastery. After they left it they spent many stages in the world of offices and money-earning, but none of them could be reconciled to this as the final stage of their lives. They hoped to leave this when they were fifty or soon after, and go back full circle to spending the twilight in the atmosphere of religion, before they went out finally in childish decay to another and better existence. The retirement from the civil service was therefore a very important point in my father's life. The English term "pensioner" has come to be incorporated into popular Burmese usage, as *pin-sin tha-ma*, so full of meaning is it. Most men at this time look about for a town which will ensure easy living and performance of meritorious deeds, in which to settle down. We went back to Thaton because of our family connections, but, as it happened, Thaton was also the most noted town in Burma for the settling of pin-sin tha-mas; it was indeed the pensioner's paradise.

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Thaton is a very old town. From the fifth to the tenth century A.D. it flourished as the centre of a Buddhist kingdom of Talaings, while the greater Burmese capital at Pagan was still without the true faith. There the Burmese King and the people were under the sway of a body of monks called the Aris, whose hypnotic influence was exercised through the practice of ritualistic observances contrary to the teachings of the Buddha and of which they set themselves to be the high priests. To this capital came a Buddhist monk from Thaton called Shin Arahan. He came into the presence of the King with his staff and a simple robe and the stamp of an ascetic life on his face, but also with the serene assurance that a monk's life ennobled any man beyond all other men, for he went up to the throne of the King and sat upon it. King Anawrahta asked, "What is the true teaching of this holy religion, and where can one get its Books?" Shin Arahan then told the King of the Buddhist kingdom of Thaton and the sacred scriptures which were there. The King of Pagan sent messengers to Thaton for copies of the scriptures, but the proud King at Thaton would not yield them. The

Burmese King thereupon went down with an army which succeeded in carrying off King, Clergy and Scriptures from the unfortunate city of Thaton. King Manuha of Thaton languished on a throne seat of bare stone in Pagan, but the religion thrived and blossomed into the grandeur of the thousand pagodas and temples of Pagan, so that even today Burmans can see the white majesty of the Ananda and rejoice in the way their kings received and enshrined their faith. With king and religion transplanted, Thaton fell into a decline, and soon lost her trade also, for the sea coast extended and left Thaton a dry inland town. However, [133] it never lost its reputation as the old seat of religion; its rich geographical features also remained—a soil which can grow rice, fruits and plantations of other crops in abundance; its easy access to the big towns of Moulmein and Rangoon; the Martaban Hills which were ranged behind the town. and over which waterfalls tumbled down to cross the red laterite roads as streams of clear water.

Most pensioners, by the time they retired, had already established some form of livelihood other than the drawing of their pension. My father owned two rubber plantations just outside Thaton, each about 110 acres. Burma is not one of the chief rubber producing areas of the world, but the country round Tenasserim is suitable for rubber-growing and produced the greater part of what was, in 1939, a total of over 22,000,000 lbs. Thaton district contained about 15,628 acres of rubber, between big planters and many small plantations like ours.

My parents started our estates in the form of clearings which they planted with the help of my grandfather in about 1910, before my father became a myook, and were in time to reap the riches of the great boom in the post-war years, when they were selling rubber at Rs. 2/- per lb. and my father bought a motor boat and my mother many diamonds. As a Government servant my father was not allowed to work at any trade, so he handed over the possession of the estates to my mother's sister, our Kyi-Kyi Lon, who all her spinster life has devoted herself to my mother and to us. She worked the estates for us and, in the awful years of the slump that followed, we quite forgot indeed that we owned any such things as rubber plantations, for the only connection which my father ever had with them, the receipt of money from Kyi-Kyi, disappeared completely. In 1935, however, when my father retired, the market for rubber had just begun to stir into being, the Burma Rubber Committee allowed planters like us an annual quota of about 20,000 lbs or two-thirds of our production, which we hoped to sell at roughly as. 7 per lb, and my father was free to work them again. He had no technical knowledge and the minimum amount of business acumen, and I never ceased to wonder how money could come to us in this haphazard way. We

becoming common. Borrowing money is always such a shameful thing 459
to Burmans that highly usurious rates prevail. The minimum rate of these private money-lenders is Re. 1/8 per Rs. 100/- per month, *i.e.* 18% per annum.

But this emphasis on money-making during the retirement period 181
was not pure avariciousness. It was connected with the ability to dis- 593
charge the duties of a parent and a good Buddhist during one's last years, to have sufficient means to settle children in a good marriage, which is one of the duties laid down for a good parent, and to make many donations towards pagodas, resthouses and monasteries, all as a foundation for a rebirth into a better existence.

For men like my father, this last period of their lives was a soft and 887
gentle immersion in the atmosphere which pervaded their childhood in 177
the monastery, and which had been banished into a memory with the years of English education, government posts, courts and litigation, and the rearing of children whose future must be bound up with the obtaining of better government posts.

During these years, my father continued his daily prayers before 887
the altar, but they were short and he said them softly, his feet were shod 788
with shoes and socks, his tourings took him to headmen's houses more often than to monasteries, his evenings were spent in playing tennis in- 593
stead of chinlon, and drinking lime-juice instead of coconut water, and his houses of the regulation pattern were filled with cane furniture made 177, 88
by convicts in jails. What a far cry from the dim light on wooden floors and pillars, the steady chorus of young monks at prayers. My father, who during his working years had encouraged us to eat, laugh and be merry in each present moment, now dismayed us with a sudden conviction of the vanity of all worldly things, towns, society, dress and ornament. We woke up at dawn to the sound of his prayers, and on [741]
most mornings he walked out of the town to the hills where the monasteries and resthouses were gathered; he walked barefoot again with great enjoyment in those quiet grounds, turned aside to supervise the building of a *thein*, a house for the ordination and meditation of monks, which he had persuaded a more wealthy friend to endow. He no longer showered on us de luxe editions of Western encyclopaedias and the collected works of Dickens and Scott as he used to, but bought richly carved book cases and sacred books for the monasteries in Thaton. We no longer ate our meals on chairs, sitting up at a table, but at a low round table on the polished floor. My father sat cross legged, but he could not go back to eating with his fingers, he still used a spoon and fork. At nights we fell asleep to the sound of his prayers and it was like a benediction. Buddhist prayers in Burma consist of two parts: the first is a

long recitation of precepts and lauds, mostly in Pali and not intelligible to the casual ear. The second part, the *hsu-taung*, is the asking for blessings in a formula which asks: "May (my mother) be blessed. May (a married couple) have long life together." My father worked through a list of all his and my mother's relations and connections. Going down in order of seniority he fitted them all into a rhythm and we came to know the place of each in this melodious chant. When we were young we sometimes waited with bated breath for the turn of a relation who had just quarrelled with my parents, but my father never omitted to ask for blessings on him. We loved this part of our parents' prayers. Uncles, first and second cousins whom we did not see for long stretches

of time, were kep familiar in this way. Relationships were prefixed to each name; births, deaths and marriages were registered, the infant cousins added, the newly-dead aunts omitted, and the new niece-at-law joined in a long and happy life to her husband. We loved especially our own place in the litany—my sisters, because they were given their full and correct names by which they were never called, and I, because I was an exception, called even in this formal litany by the affectionate name my parents had for me. "*Tha Maung Sett Kaing*," my father, would chant, "*Tha Maung Sett Kaing, Tha-mi Mamie, Tha-mi Ma Mya Thin, Tha-mi Ma Hin Aye, Tha-mi Ma Myat Kyi:* Son Succeeding and Lasting, Daughter Mamie, Daughter Fragrant Emerald, Daughter Cool as the Dew, Daughter Noble and Clear."

Most of the pensioners lived a similar life to my father's at this time. It was indicative of the contentment of their retired existence that they

never talked about the business of their past working days when they met. Sometimes they showed a fleeting interest in news of the postings of friends still in service, but even the official matters of Thaton district itself did not enter into their discussions. They talked of charity donations, of the respective monasteries which they endowed and attended, and of formulæ of *eggaya-hto*, alchemy, or the search for the philosopher's stone which will turn all metals to gold. Most Burmans get interested in eggaya-hto during their later years, even if few now practise it.

This alchemy, which has no place among the true teachings of Buddhism, has to be done under auspicious astrological influences and is usually carried on in secret. Burman Buddhists condemn the use of it when it is carried on for *lawba*, greed for riches, but others justify the process as a means of concentrating the mental faculties. The common stories tell of hermits in the forests, who by their ascetic life and concentrated meditation have more powers over the forces of nature, as being well versed in the processes of alchemy. When such a hermit achieves the extreme concentration of mind on his task he is successful—the philosopher's stone is discovered, the body of the hermit then disappears in the dissolving of matter, and his spirit is free to live unhampered by the body, till the arrival of the next Buddha on the earth. Most Burmese women, however, although they believe that this happens in the case of hermits, object very strongly to the practice of alchemy on the part of their menfolk, owing to the money and energy that is wasted on seeking out new and expensive formulæ once the craze has got hold of a man. All experiments are started with mercury which is melted with other minerals, animal or vegetable substances which derive their magical properties partly from their inaccessibility, partly from being treated with prescribed rites. My father had no intention of taking up alchemy and impoverishing us, but he too was very interested to hear of the success and failure of various methods. These discussions must have been kept well anchored to reality by the other chief topic of discussion—the families of the pensioners.

The five duties of a parent towards his children include the settling of the child in a good marriage. By the time the a-so-ya mins retire, their sons and daughters have reached a marriageable age. The sons are in the process of winning a good position in one of the government services and their daughters have been dressed with an adequate amount of jewellery. The marriage market, which had no existence in former Burmese society and which still is unheard of in Ye, and among the poorer people, is now a very concrete institution among the educated and modern classes. The rise of the minkadaw class and of higher paid Class I government officials has been mainly responsible for this. More

of their families. The bride and groom are each handed a spray of flowers from the offering bowls and they make obeisance to the guardian spirits of their respective households. With a second spray they make obeisance to their parents and elders. Then a small tray containing fruit and rice is placed before them. The lay elder places a spoonful of this food first to the bridegroom's, then to the bride's lips. As he does this he makes a statement to the effect that this is the auspicious meal and that he hopes blessings may flow from it. 794 585

At this point, a happy and fruitfully married couple from among the oldest people in the community step forward to marry the couple. The left hand of the man is placed on top of the right hand of the girl. Water is poured on their hands thus joined and a silk scarf tied over them as the elderly couple recite words to the effect that they are now united. A chanter arises and intones a song of praise for long life. The contents of the bowl of puffed rice and money are scattered among the audience, and everyone scrambles for them. Now the bride and groom rise and are led to the bridal chamber, across the doorway of which is stretched a golden chain. After the bride has entered, anyone who wishes to do so tries to barricade the doorway and demand money of the groom. He is obliged to pay everyone who makes such demands. This money is known as 'stone money,' from the old custom, still practiced sometimes, of stoning the house of a couple on their wedding night until the bridegroom arises and pays them to desist. This behavior, the taunts and demands that are expressed, has an implied bawdiness about it. Once the couple have entered the bridal chamber, others may go in to inspect it. When all have left the chamber there is a general feast. Usually the feast in Tadagale partakes of the nature of a tea party, since a full scale feast is expensive. Each guest receives a symbolic gift, usually a cigar or a fan.

Old Age. Old age is the period after one's children are grown, the 'third age' of life. Women are definitely regarded as old after the menopause. The Burmese terms for 'old lady' and 'old man' are synonymous with grandparent terms, both in address and reference. Sometimes 'old mother' is used instead of 'old lady.' Long life is considered a great blessing and an indication of merit earned. Long life is prayed for and old age greatly idealized. 886 601 761

The ideal aged person is one who has successfully reared a family, has grandchildren, and a certain amount of material wealth. The aged are expected to be retiring and unobstrusive in their behavior. They should not go out visiting very much; they should eat less and avoid appearing too well dressed or jeweled when attending religious observances. 888

An attitude of resignation characterizes the outlook of the aged person. It is unheard of that old people should work. A possible exception would be a village headman, who, it is felt, should be a person of long experience. When aged people live with their children they assume the role of teachers of their grandchildren. Most of the time of elderly people is spent in activities centering around the pagodas and monasteries, organizing of religious festivals, and raising funds for the monks and charities. They often take leading roles in such activities. 887

The elderly members of a household arise early to see that the rice is cooked for the daily offering to the monks, and to insure that the household altar is properly looked after. It is preferable for them to arise before dawn, for to do so is considered very meritorious.

to worship. These are the eighth day of the waxing of the moon, full moon day, the eighth day of the waning moon, and a day during the transition to the new moon. The second and fourth of these are considered especially sacred. On these duty days all work in the village ceases and the public school is closed. The people go, usually in family groups, to the monastery. There they say prayers before the images of the Buddha and present gifts to the monks. For a good many, a large portion of the day, after the visit to the monastery, is passed in social visiting and in generally relaxing. For the more devout, usually the elderly people, the duty days are more serious; they abstain from food and drink after midday until the following sunrise, spending the day in silent meditation and prayer. 796 [887]

Ceremonies

Thingyan, the New Year. Throughout the year a number of the Burmese religious festivals are celebrated in Tadagale. We may begin with the New Year festival, which occurs in April, beginning on or about April 13th, according to the determination made by astrologers.

Traditionally, the New Year festival calls for visiting the pagodas and monasteries and washing the images of the Buddha, after which one calls upon his elders and sprinkles them gently with scented water from a silver bowl. The young men of the village go from house to house, dancing and singing to the accompaniment of an orchestra. At each house they sprinkle water on the elders and ask them to call out the young girls. The girls are likewise sprinkled with water by means of a flower carried in the bowls.

In Tadagale today, many of the traditional customs of the New Year are still observed. Preparatory to the holiday, houses are swept and compounds cleared of all refuse. Everything is made clean and orderly. The images of the Buddha are washed, elders are called upon, sprinkled with water, and wished well. But, as in many parts of the country, the New Year festival has tended to take on a rather secularized character in modern times. Water sprinkling has become water throwing; groups of people, especially youngsters, go into the towns in carts or trucks, armed with buckets of water which they throw at passers-by. The name 'Water Festival' which has been given to the New Year celebration is singularly appropriate, since water-throwing and associated hilarity has overshadowed the sacred significance of the occasion. Some villagers go into Rangoon for the celebration, where everyone engages in dousing everyone he encounters (monks excepted), utilizing every means from buckets to large hoses attached to city water hydrants. These activities are in contrast with the traditionally serious, sacred character of the New Year as conceived by older villagers. The schoolmaster of the community, a middle-aged man with many years of religious training, spoke of the New Year: 796 178 527

> Thingyan is the New Year festival, but the villagers do not know the significance of the festival. They know only that it is a feast day and a holiday and a day for having fun. In reality there should be no frivolity on New Year's day; it is a day on which one should fast and pray, for one is now one year older and therefore nearer death. One should meditate on the futility of frivolity as compared with the blessedness of deeds of merit.

Waso, the Buddhist Lent. In July, on the full moon day of the month of Waso, there begins a sacred period of some three months, corresponding closely 796 785

304 562 178 The custom is dying out today; but, in the villages, the teen-age boy frequently, on the encouragement of their family submit to the tattooing of a small area on the thigh. These decorations seen when the longyis are wrapped high were regarded as essential and those without them were openly criticised.

[751] A second type of tattooing consisting of potent symbols were, as still are, placed on the inner arm, back, or high forehead as a means of magical protection against harm. Snake, knife, cudgel and bullet proof motifs are common. Young girls frequently have the inner arm tattooed with such a charm.

838 826 Homo-sexuals are known as MEIN MA SHA ("women-half") and are recognised by their effeminate gestures, "pretty" looks and clothing. They frequently wear THANAKHA face powder, tie their longyis in a simple tucked-in fold, and wear jewelry like the women. They are rare in villages but have banded together into a society in Rangoon. They appear to be tolerated but are scorned.

It is believed that individuals known as MEIN-THE-PON-LAIN-HNEI-PON-LAIN ("Female sex- 2 sexes") exist . These persons are supposed to be alternately a man for one month, and a woman for the following [775] month in a complete process of transformation. Both the MEIN MA SHA and these individuals result from illicit seduction activities in a previous existence - the MEIN MA SHA being the less sinful of the two

792 291 293 The PONGYI dress consist of orange cotton cloth - one garment being a longyi with a folled tie at the waist; the other a wide band drapped as a robe. When begging the PONGYIS have a special arrangement of the robe which wraps the left arm and covers the neck region. The nuns wear a robe garment over a long sleeved KINGYI jacket of the same colour. They are frequently seen with a scarf folded on the head. Both orders carry orange-cloth (lacquered) parasols on long bamboo shafts, a string of beads and large palm leaf fans. The Pongyis carry leather bags suspended on a shoulder strap for personal effects. PONGYI slippers have a square toe, are made of stiff leather with reinforced soles.

[887] Religious women (including old women) wear chocolate coloured HTAMEINS, KINGYIS and carry a PONG (a narrow scarf 4 of 5 feet in

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The elderly members of the household arise early to see that rice is cooked for the daily offering to the monks and to insure that the household altar is properly looked after. It is preferable for them to arise before dawn, for to do so is considered very meritorious.

[784] Certain of the taboos that apply to younger people, mostly those connected with death, do not apply to the aged.

761 *Death and Funeral Observances.* To the Burmese, the decline of the human body is part of the inevitable course of nature. When this occurs the soul must
[775] leave. The butterfly is the symbol of life: when a person dies, "the butterfly leaves his body."

763 When death approaches, valuables, such as jewelry, are removed from the person and the death-bed, because people are reluctant to use anything with which a person dies. These things are given to the monastery. A relative chants as the person is dying, to fix his mind upon the truths of Buddhism and to divert it from worldly goods and ties of kinship.

764 As soon as death has occurred, everyone present cries and wails. Before rigor mortis sets in, relatives bathe the corpse, using a new water pot for the purpose and pouring the water over the body from foot to head, the opposite direction
[801] from that practiced by the living. If the water pot must be refilled at all, this must be done an odd number of times. The pot is then put outside the house, upside down, and anyone outside the family of the deceased may take it. Then